

Judge blocks town's ban on immigrants

PHILADELPHIA, Pennsylvania (Reuters) -- A federal judge Tuesday temporarily barred Hazleton, Pennsylvania, from implementing a law designed to prevent illegal immigrants from living in the town.

Judge James Munley of the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania issued a temporary restraining order against Hazleton City Council, preventing it from enforcing its Illegal Immigration Relief Act Ordinance.

The measure has become a model for other U.S. towns that blame illegal immigrants for a range of social problems.

The law, which had been scheduled to take effect Wednesday, would fine landlords found to be renting space to illegal aliens, close down businesses that hire them, and allow legal employees to sue the businesses for employment lost during such a shutdown. A related law also establishes English as the town's official language.

The restraining order is valid until November 14.

In a 13-page opinion, Munley said immigrants risked "irreparable injury" by being evicted from their apartments if the law is enforced. He also said he was not convinced by the city council's argument that illegal immigration increases crime and overburdens social services.

"Defendant offers only vague generalizations about the crime allegedly caused by illegal immigrants but has nothing concrete to back up these claims," Munley wrote.

He added that since the plaintiffs -- representing the town's Hispanic community -- claim the law affects constitutionally protected rights, it is in the public interest to delay enforcement of the ordinance until a court can consider its constitutional implications.

About a third of Hazleton's 31,000 residents are immigrants from Central America. According to local civil rights activists, about a quarter of the town's immigrant population is in the United States illegally.

The law, passed by the city council in July and revised in September, is seen as a template for similar laws passed by 10 other towns around the country, according to the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, one of the groups that has joined in a lawsuit challenging the measure.

Thirty-two towns are considering similar measures.

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